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SUBJECT: BULGARIA/IRAQ: PRESIDENT CALLS FOR A "QUICK
BUT NOT PREMATURE" WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS

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1. (U) SUMMARY: Bulgarian President Georgi Purvanov called January 21 for a "quick but not premature" withdrawal from the multinational force in Iraq, urging parliament to bring the Bulgarian troops home by the end of 2005. Purvanov, who addressed Parliament and the diplomatic corps on the third anniversary of his taking office, said that after the elections in Iraq the coalition would need to develop a tentative timetable for ending the foreign military presence there. "The debate on the issue should no longer be delayed, and Bulgaria's future presence in Iraq should be discussed both within the coalition and among domestic political forces," said Purvanov. Bulgaria, he assured, would continue to act as a stable and predictable partner. He also proposed that Bulgaria's 2005 general elections be held on June 25, and recommended holding a referendum on EU membership in the late autumn of this year or early spring 2006. END SUMMARY

2. (U) Purvanov said "the elections in Iraq should open a new stage in the stabilization of the country, its democratization, and its achievement of sovereignty, including withdrawal of foreign troops. It is important to reaffirm Bulgaria's principled position that we will not make any decisions under terrorist pressure, that we are a part of the united allied configuration and the anti-terror coalition, and that Bulgaria is a reliable and predictable partner."

3. (U) After Bulgaria consults with its allies, Purvanov said the National Assembly should hold a debate, review the Bulgarian mission in Iraq, and fix the end of 2005 as the deadline for the withdrawal of the Bulgarian contingent in Iraq. He noted the 2005 deadline was in line with the positions envisaged in UN Security Council Resolution 1546. The deadline may later be extended if the UN, the European Union, or NATO decide to assist Iraq's further recovery at the request of the new Iraqi authorities, Purvanov added. He said that after the January elections, Bulgaria may also consider reducing and/or transforming its presence in Iraq, shifting the focus toward training of Iraqi forces.

4. (U) The President's proposal for a parliamentary debate on Iraq was promptly backed by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which Purvanov chaired before taking office in January 2002. Socialist leader Sergei Stanishev, whose party is expected to win a plurality in the next parliament, caused a stir last week when he announced the BSP would withdraw Bulgaria's troops from Iraq if it manages to form a coalition after the elections (reftel). Stanishev reaffirmed this stance January 21, saying the BSP's position was in line with the position of most European states and corresponded with the opinion of the majority of Bulgarians.

5. (SBU) COMMENT: Purvanov, who generally has supported the continued deployment of troops in Iraq, took a balanced position that responds to the expectations of most Bulgarians. At the same time, he allowed for the possible extension of Bulgaria's military presence beyond 2005 following further UN action and/or a request by the Iraqi government. He highlighted the need for consultations with coalition partners and noted "the unfavorable effect of the sudden pullout of coalition members from Iraq." The President's stance contrasts with the position of his former colleagues in the BSP, who advocate a withdrawal immediately after the January elections. END COMMENT